

VZCZCXYZ0071
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHAE #0491/01 1581428
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 071428Z JUN 06
FM AMEMBASSY ASMARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8211
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA PRIORITY 5900
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 2804
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1147
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1320
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000491

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

LONDON FOR AFRICA WATCHERS
PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/07/2016
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: VILLAGERS DEMAND ANSWERS FROM THE GSE ABOUT
MISSING HUSBANDS

CLASSIFIED BY: AMB Scott H. DeLisi, for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

REFTEL: 05 ASMARA 757

1. (C) Echoing the tactics of the "Madres de Plaza de Mayo" in Buenos Aires in the late 1970s, an estimated 30 to 50 wives and elders from the Debub region came to Asmara last week to inquire of the Office of the President about their missing husbands. The women and elders sought information about their husband who were arrested following their children's disappearance from Eritrea to either avoid national service requirements or to desert from current service in the army. As previously reported, the GSE began in fall 2005 arresting the parents of such individuals who fled Eritrea(reftel) and now require families pay at least 50,000 nakfa (3333 USD) to ensure their release. In the case of these families who came to Asmara last week, the husbands remain incarcerated months after the families paid the bail monies.

2. (C) On the morning of Tuesday, May 30 the women and elders appeared at the Office of the President in downtown Asmara to ask about the situation of their husbands. They did manage to gain access to the presidential compound where a member of the presidential staff met with them. The staff reportedly told the women they should take their complaint to the Zoba(region) administrator. The women responded, they had been complaining to the administrator for months with no result and wanted an answer. There are also reports that they claimed that even during the most repressive days of the Mengistu regime when Eritrea was still part of Ethiopia, the government did not arrest parents when their children disappeared to join the ELF/EPLF(Eritrean struggle).

3. (C) When the women insisted on clarification and none was provided, they reportedly demanded to be given an answer or be arrested. The GSE complied with their request and 4 police trucks carried the women and elders to Police Station Number 5 in Asmara. A police contact has told us that seven elderly women have been released but that at least 22 remain incarcerated and may have been transferred to Mai Serwa, a prison in the outskirts of Asmara administered by the military.

¶4. (C) Post became aware of the incident on Tuesday, May 30 when a staff member witnessed the gathering of women near the Office of the President, but did not know the details of the event. PolOff heard additional details of the story from an Eritrean contact the next day, and we have confirmed the incident from other sources as well, including an Amcit who witnessed the arrest of the women and shared it with the RSO. The Ambassador raised the incident on June 6 with the MFA Director of the Americas and the UN Ghirmai Ghebremarian, voicing his concerns but noting our desire to hear the GSE's version of events if there was one. Ghirmai professed to have no knowledge of the incident.

¶5. (C) Comment: The arrest of family members of deserters and escapees is not new and, obviously, continues. Although there is no law, proclamation or regulation to support this, that does not bother the GSE for which this unfortunate form of extortion has become common practice. While some Eritreans privately express discontent and anger at current GSE practices there are neither media outlets nor opposition groups through which their unhappiness can be expressed. In this environment then, the coordinated action of the wives and village elders comes as something of a surprise and suggests that levels of frustration and dissatisfaction may be greater than assumed. So far, however, that possibility does not seem to daunt the GSE which not only continues detentions of family members and youth round-ups, but has recently advised the public that they should welcome starvation as "martyrdom for the cause" if that is the end-result of the GSE's new push for self-reliance. Although the Eritrean public may at some point say enough is enough, the GSE seems confident that that point is still far away. End Comment.

DeLisi